

Bread and Circuses by Kathy Emery
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When I sat down to watch this year's Super Bowl, I thought again of the Roman Empire's coliseums, packed full of people being placated by bloody displays of testosterone-driven competitions. But as I began to read all the newspaper accounts leading up to and in the aftermath of the Super Bowl, I saw a pattern that made my first reaction seem highly simplistic.

It seems to me that sports, rather than knitting together authentic community, instead is a screen upon which we project our need to be active members of a community in order to have meaningful and enriched lives. Rooting for a team, makes one feel like a member of a community. A sports fan prays for his team to win. When the team wins, the fan feels he or she, as a member of a tightly knit and faithful community, contributed to that victory. A student at Guilford College wrote about how such faithfulness to a team translates into a sense of individual power: "Rooting for a sports team requires spirituality. . . . When your team wins, it's like yelling at a streetlight to turn green, and it does, but tenfold" (*The Guilfordian*, 2/12/10). Perhaps the students at Carver High School in the lower 9th Ward hoped for such magical powers when they added "on their own" the Saints won/lost record to the required list of "name, period, date, and teacher" on every school paper they wrote (*ESPN.com*, 12/19/09).

A reporter for the *LA Times* commented on how collective faith in conquest seemed to be rewarded by a victory that somehow, magically recreated a viable (livable and recognizable) community: "It seemed that everyone -- from the saltiest line cook to the stuffiest Uptown lawyer -- was decked out in black and gold, and people spoke of the Saints' victory in strangely providential tones. One popular T-shirt called them 'Destiny's Team.' . . . New Orleans, once written off as lost and unlivable, had been validated." One New Orleanian echoed this perspective by posting on the Nola.com website on 2/7/10, "...Brees would win the MVP because he was destined to win. The nine on his jersey represents all the ones from the Ninth Ward. Number nine won because the Ninth Ward needs to be recognized as a part of these UNITED STATES THAT HAS BEEN FORGOTTEN." A *Chicago Tribune* reporter quoted a native New Orleanian: "I think this is all God's way of giving back to New Orleans. I don't think this is about football. This is about bringing New Orleans back together" (1/30/10).

Katrina's devastation destroyed communities not just by destroying houses, but by undermining a sense of collective identity. Since Katrina, New Orleanians have desperately wanted to be "brought back together" by some equally profound event. They feel God has delivered an event (the Super Bowl victory) that has given them a new collective identity—one, however, based on assumed/projected personality traits of a team, rather than the collective work, culture and values of the individuals of the community themselves. Identity is fundamental to a person's or community's ability to act on its own behalf. The Super Bowl victory brought tears and joy to many in New Orleans. It has brought hope to many that what was destroyed can be rebuilt.

But the kinds of organizing and empowerment needed to rebuild the kind of community that nourishes peoples' souls in an authentic and sustained way do not follow magically from a sporting event's result. Sports, unfortunately, functions as an ineffective substitute for the real thing. To build real community, to have real agency in one's life, one must begin to really believe in the humanity of all, not just one's tribe. One needs to understand that competition is inherently destructive (even as one participates in it). One needs to start listening to those he or she is afraid of and doesn't understand. And most of all, one must start to organize one's community to demand what it needs, not wait for some far off leader or supernatural force to do it magically for you.